

04/02/21 Friday

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Mysterious 'Blobs' Near Norway Contain Squid Embryos, Mucus - Study
by [Mary F.](#)

Illex coindetii, also more commonly known as the southern shortfin squid or broadtail shortfin squid, is a species of neritic squids found in the Mediterranean Sea and on both sides of the north Atlantic Ocean.

A [new study](#) published on March 30 in the journal *Scientific Reports* has found that jelly-like orbs found in the western coast of Norway several years ago are the egg sacs of the *Illex coindetii*. According to the researchers, nearly 100 sightings of the jelly-like orbs, which are more than 3 feet wide, have been reported around Norway and the Mediterranean Sea since 1985. The translucent blobs also contain a dark streak in the center of the orbs.

The study concluded that each jelly-like blob may contain hundreds of thousands of squid eggs covered by a bubble of disintegrating mucus. The researchers came to this conclusion after studying the tissue samples of four blobs collected by divers in small plastic bottles in 2019. A DNA analysis of the tissues revealed that the blobs contained *Illex coindetii* squids.

"We also got to see what's inside the actual sphere, showing squid embryos at four different stages," lead study author Halldis Ringvold, manager of the marine zoology organization Sea Snack Norway, told [Live Science](#). "In addition, we could follow how the sphere actually changes consistency — from firm and transparent to rupturing and opaque — as the embryos develop."

During reproduction, the female squids produce large egg masses consisting of their own mucus to safeguard their embryos from predators, the researchers noted.

However, the researchers cannot conclusively say that nearly all the 100 blobs observed in recent years belong to the same species without sampling tissues from each one. However, since many of the blobs were similar in shape and size to the ones that were tested, it's likely that many of the blobs were made by *Illex coindetii*.

The researchers also noted that the dark streak cutting through many of the blobs may be ink that was released when the eggs were fertilized or some sort of camouflage mechanism.

"Spheres with or without ink may be a result of spheres being at different maturity stages, where spheres with ink are freshly spawned," the researchers wrote. "After a while, when embryos start developing, the whole sphere, including the streak, will start to disintegrate."

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Florida Governor Issues Executive Order Banning Vaccine Passports
by [Mary F.](#)

With guidance from the US President Joe Biden administration, private US companies are working to develop “vaccine passports,” or a way for individuals to prove that they have been vaccinated against the novel coronavirus.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis on Friday issued an executive order banning the use of “vaccine passports,” which can be used as proof by people to demonstrate they have been inoculated against COVID-19.

“Today I issued an executive order prohibiting the use of so-called COVID-19 vaccine passports,” DeSantis said in a statement on Twitter. “The Legislature is working on making permanent these protections for Floridians and I look forward to signing them into law soon.” Under the [order](#), government entities would be barred from issuing “vaccine passports, vaccine passes, or other standardized documentation for the purpose of certifying an individual’s COVID-19 vaccine status to a third party.”

In addition, the order would prevent businesses in Florida from having to provide documentation to certify their COVID-19 inoculation to receive services.

In the order, DeSantis also notes that COVID-19 vaccinations are not required by law and that vaccination records are private health information. In addition, DeSantis notes that the requirement to show a passport to go about daily life would “reduce individual freedom” and essentially create “two classes of citizens,” [Local10 reported](#).

Several other Republican lawmakers have expressed concern over vaccine passports. US Representative Lauren Boebert called vaccine passports “unconstitutional” on Twitter, while US Representative Pete Sessions said in a statement to Fox News that a vaccine passport measure would be a “complete government overstep.”

“Vaccine credentials would be a complete government overstep. Individuals in America have a personal responsibility for their health,” [Sessions told the outlet](#). “Implementing a ‘vaccine passport’ runs the risk of undermining public trust and substantially limiting normal day-to-day essential activities.”

During a press conference Monday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said that the Biden administration would not issue a federal mandate requiring Americans to obtain credentials to show they’ve been vaccinated against the virus, but that it plans to release guidelines to help private companies develop the so-called vaccine passports.

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Multistate Salmonella Infections Could Be Tied to Wild Songbirds, CDC Warns
by [Mary F.](#)

Salmonella is the name of a group of bacteria that is a common cause of foodborne illness. The bacteria occurs in raw poultry, eggs, beef and sometimes unwashed fruits and vegetables. A salmonella infection can cause symptoms like diarrhea, fever, chills and abdominal pain. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is currently investigating a multistate salmonella outbreak that the organization believes may be connected to wild songbirds and bird feeders.

So far, at least 19 people in eight states have been infected with the virus, which can cause symptoms six hours to six days post-exposure. The patients range in age from 2 months old to 89 years old.

"Epidemiologic and laboratory data show that contact with wild songbirds and bird feeders is likely making people sick in this outbreak," [the CDC said](#).

Although no deaths have been reported, at least eight people have been hospitalized due to the illness.

In addition, the CDC warned that wild songbirds can be found throughout the United States, so the outbreak may not just be limited to the states with known illnesses which include:

Washington, Oregon, California, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi and New Hampshire.

"The true number of sick people in an outbreak is likely much higher than the number reported because many people recover without medical care and are not tested for salmonella," the CDC warned.

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) has been receiving calls about one species of songbird in particular, pine siskins, as residents have been finding the dead animal near bird feeders.

"Salmonellosis occurs periodically in pine siskins in some winters throughout their range. When large numbers of pine siskins congregate, the disease can spread rapidly causing high mortality. Most birds die within 24 hours of infection," Krysta Rogers, an avian disease specialist, [said in CDFW notice](#).

Songbirds can become infected with salmonella when they come into contact with objects or ingest food or water that has been contaminated with feces from an infected bird.

Although Salmonella usually resolves itself on its anyone, patients should seek medical attention if the illness lasts for more than a few days and causes high fever or bloody stools, [according to the Mayo Clinic](#).

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Police: 18-Year Veteran Killed in Ramming Attack Outside US Capitol, Knife-Armed Suspect Shot Dead

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

According to the acting chief of US Capitol Police, the suspect shot by officers in an altercation outside the Capitol building on Friday exited his vehicle and charged the officers with a knife in his hand.

Acting US Capitol Police (USCP) Chief Yogananda D. Pittman told reporters in Upper Senate Park in Washington, DC, on Friday afternoon that a suspect shot by Capitol Police officers earlier in the day was not known to USCP and that there was no indication of "any nexus to any member of Congress."

Pittman said that 1:02 pm, "a suspect entered what we refer to as the 'north barricade of the Capitol.' The suspect rammed his car into two of our officers and then his the north barricade

barrier. At such time, the suspect exited the vehicle with a knife in hand. Our officers then engaged that suspect, he did not respond to verbal commands. The suspect did start lunging toward US Capitol Police officers, at which time US Capitol Police officers fired upon the suspect."

She noted that the suspect had been pronounced dead, while two USCP officers were transported to different area hospitals, one of whom has since also died. She released no names at the press conference.

Acting chief of US Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) Robert Contee told reporters the MPD's homicide and internal affairs divisions were taking over the investigation of the crime scene. He said there did not appear to be any indication the attack was terrorism-related, but the investigation is ongoing and investigators will continue to see if there's any links to terrorism. Citing four law enforcement officials, NBC News later identified the suspect as 25-year-old Noad Green of Indiana, though he may have been living recently in Virginia. The network also said that Green identified himself as a member of the Nation of Islam in a Facebook post.

Just two hours before the attack, according to CNN, the suspect posted a video on his Instagram account with a caption that said: "The US Government is the #1 enemy of Black people!"

US Capitol Police [shared a statement](#) about the police officer killed in the attack. William 'Billy' Evans had been a member of the United States Capitol Police for 18 years and was a member of the Capitol Division's First Responder's Unit.

The White House said President Joe Biden is aware of the incident, and was not in the area at the time. He arrived at Camp David at 12:53 pm EST where he is spending the Easter weekend, media said citing spokesperson Jen Psaki. Biden in a statement expressed condolences and said he ordered the White House flag to be lowered at half-mast.

Earlier on Friday afternoon, witnesses reported [a hail of gunfire](#) outside the north barricade US national legislature. The incident caused the Capitol to be [placed on lockdown](#), and witnesses recorded a US Park Police helicopter landing in the plaza east of the building, between the Capitol and the US Supreme Court.

A Sputnik correspondent at the scene witnessed and took photos of National Guard troops positioned around the perimeter, some carrying riot shields and other protective equipment. US National Guard troops were still on guard outside the legislature on Friday, having been posted to Washington, DC, in January after supporters of then-US President Donald Trump stormed the building in an attempt to void the results of the November 2020 election. Five people died in the assault, including a US Capitol Police officer and one rioter who was shot by a USCP officer. Their rioters' efforts ultimately failed, and US President Joe Biden was sworn in under heavy guard on January 20.

However, thousands of troops have remained around the Capitol building to guard against further attacks the FBI had warned of. Large sections of fencing that secluded much of the surrounding area for months have only begun to come down in recent weeks.

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US Air Force Bomber Chief Dismisses Army's Ground-Based Missile Push as 'Expensive' and 'Stupid'

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While the US Army tries to edge its way into the hypersonic weapons game with a ground-launched intermediate-range missile, the US Air Force is seeking to defend its turf as the Pentagon's supreme long-range strike service.

The US Army's primary modernization focus is its Long Range Precision Fires (LRPF) program, intended to give the Army missile and artillery weaponry capable of surface-to-surface strikes from increasingly long distances. However, the head of the US' bomber fleet let slip earlier this week that he thinks that's a really dumb idea.

"Why in the world would we entertain a brutally expensive idea when we don't, as the [Defense] Department, have the money to go do that?" Gen. Timothy Ray, who leads Air Force Global Strike Command, asked the hosts of the Mitchell Institute's [Aerospace Advantage podcast](#) released on Thursday.

"I've had a few congressmen ask me. And you know what? Honestly I think it's stupid," Ray continued, [according to Defense News](#). "I just think it's a stupid idea to go and invest that kind of money that recreates something that the service has mastered and that we're doing already right now. Why in the world would you try that? I try to make sure that my language isn't a little more colorful than it is, but give me a break."

In particular, Ray argued it would be hard to sell regional partners in Europe and Asia on the Army's new weapons, whereas bombers have "a proven capability" to strike targets at extended range.

According to Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy, the service has already spent \$1.3 billion on its LRPF program and he [asked lawmakers last month](#) to okay another \$1.7 billion for fiscal year 2021, \$800 million of which will go towards a [ground-launched hypersonic missile](#) battery. In all, the Army foresees spending \$10 billion over the next decade on LRPF.

Some of the other weapons developed by the Army for the program have included the M982A1 Excalibur extended range [guided artillery shell](#), with a range of 43 miles, and the Extended Range Cannon Artillery (ERCA), the massive mobile cannon that fires it. Many are more recent additions, since their longer ranges potentially violated the terms of the 1987

Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which then-US President Donald Trump allowed to lapse in 2019. The treaty banned American and Russian ground-launched missiles with ranges of between 500 kilometers and 5,500 kilometers (310 to 3,420 miles), which were feared for their ability to conduct a lightning-quick nuclear strike.

Another weapon created under the program include the [Precision Strike Missile \(PrSM\)](#), a longer-range missile that will replace the Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) fired by the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) platform. The [Army is also adapting](#) the US Navy's Tomahawk cruise missile and [Standard Missile 6](#) (SM-6), originally an air defense weapon converted to surface strike.

With such ultra-long ranges, these weapons are expected to rely on "spotter" aircraft, which could be drones but also F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, which have proven in tests to be able to [transmit accurate targeting](#) information on enemy positions to HIMARS units.

However, the Marine Corps' long-range fires program has proven no more popular: in [December, lawmakers gutted](#) the USMC's budget for developing its own version of the Tomahawk as well as a [ground-based version](#) of the Naval Strike Missile. The USMC is looking to revamp its warfighting doctrine, shifting away from heavy land fighting units and toward a combination of naval units and [deployable front-line assets](#) like the HIMARS, which can be flown into forward areas at the start of a conflict and then quickly moved again.

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Video: Jet Maker Aerion Unveils Hypersonic Commercial Airliner With 2.5 Tokyo-to-LA Flight Time
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A number of design firms have declared their intent to build a new generation of supersonic commercial airliners in recent years, but so far none have taken flight. Nonetheless, some have looked toward the still-more-ambitious goal of hypersonic travel - something the US military has yet to perfect on its missiles.

Nevada-based aircraft manufacturer Aerion has revealed the design for a commercial airliner capable of reaching 3,800 miles per hour, or five times the speed of sound, making it capable of reaching any spot on Earth in just three hours.

Aviation blogger [Sam Chui wrote](#) earlier this week that Aerion, an aircraft maker based in Reno, Nevada, that is working on developing several supersonic commercial airliners, was also developing an aircraft capable of reaching hypersonic speeds.

Dubbed the AS3, the aircraft is based on the AS2 supersonic jet currently under development for several buyers, including Flexjet. According to [Aviation International News](#), the aircraft has roughly the same cabin space as a Bombardier Global 6500 or Gulfstream G600, although while the AS2 is slated to carry just 8-12 passengers, the AS3 is expected to carry about 50 people.

According to the March 29 video announcing the aircraft, it will be able to fly from Tokyo to Los Angeles in just two-and-a-half hours.

"At Aerion, our vision is to build a future where humanity can travel between any two points on our planet within three hours. Supersonic flight is the starting point, but it is just that - the beginning. To truly revolutionize global mobility as we know it today, we must push the boundaries of what is possible," Tom Vice, Aerion's Chairman, President & CEO, said in a statement quoted by Chui.

"The AS3 forms the next step in our long-term technology roadmap and will bring Aerion's high Mach flight capability to a broader audience; we look forward to sharing more on our design later this year," he added.

At its top speed, the aircraft will be in what is described as hypersonic speed - a velocity that at present can only be reached by spacecraft, rockets, and a select few types of missiles.

However, as the scramjet/ramjet technology required to power a hypersonic vehicle is slowly

refined, more aircraft makers are showing interest in building private or even commercial aircraft for travel at up to seven times faster than conventional airliners.

A supersonic airliner hasn't operated commercially since 2003, when the Concorde was retired. [Vice told CNN](#) the French-British jet was "a brilliant piece of machinery, a noble experiment, but it put too much emissions in the environment, too much noise into our communities, and was too expensive to operate."

"What we're trying to do is very different," Vice said. "We had to design an aircraft that was incredibly efficient with the lowest fuel-burn possible, so we spent 10 years thinking about advanced aerodynamics and fuel-efficient engines. We've designed specifically around noise and emissions."

Two firms contracted by the US Air Force to build ultra-fast Air Force One jets for travel by the President of the United States have based their orders on existing designs for commercial airliners, in much the same way the present Air Force One jets are based on commercial Boeing 747 airliners.

One [design bureau, Hermeus](#), presented a design last summer for a hypersonic Air Force One jet based on an existing "business class" aircraft powered by a combined cycle engine, a type of ramjet engine that can also function as a typical turbojet engine, allowing it to fly at lower speeds where ramjets become inefficient - a longstanding barrier to their practical use.

Another, [Exosonic, has been working](#) on a supersonic airliner with a low sonic boom, similarly to Aerion's AS2 designed in part by folks who worked on the X-59 QueSST research plane for NASA, and the Air Force asked about the feasibility of converting it to meet the president's unique travel needs, such as a electromagnetic pulse survivability.

Aerion, too, has partnered with the US federal space agency. In February, NASA and Aerion began a joint study to "engage in research and development on a future generation of ultra-high-speed, or high-Mach, aircraft," according to an [agency press release](#).

According to the release, the duo will be "specifically studying commercial flight in the Mach 3-5 range, the collaboration will be used to evaluate the parametric suitability of propulsion and thermal management technologies."

However, it might be possible to go even faster. Chinese scientists [announced in December](#) they had created a "sodramjet" engine capable of propelling an aircraft as fast as 11,800 miles per hour, or 16 times the speed of sound. At that velocity, the plane could go anywhere on Earth in two hours.

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NYPD No Longer Able to Search Vehicles Over Smell of Marijuana Alone, New Memo Reveals by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

After years of stalled attempts, New York lawmakers on Wednesday officially legalized the use of recreational marijuana. The measure, which took effect immediately, will see 40% of tax revenues from cannabis sales go to minority communities that have reported disproportionate numbers of marijuana-related arrests.

Officers with the New York Police Department will no longer be allowed to stop residents who are seen smoking marijuana in public or search vehicles if they detect the smell of weed, a newly released memo has detailed.

The [memorandum](#) stipulates that as a result of the Wednesday-passed legislation, residents aged 21 and older are legally allowed to possess up to 3 ounces of the recreational substance in a public place. However, it also highlights that an individual can possess up to 5 ounces of the substance in their residence, or "higher amounts" if it is prescribed by a medical professional. The four-paged memo also notes that simply smoking marijuana is no longer a "basis for an approach, stop, summons, arrest, or search" since the new legislation dictates that smoking the substance is allowed in public wherever smoking tobacco is allowed.

It's worth noting that stricter legislation may be imposed to map out specific areas where marijuana users will be able to freely partake. The city currently has a ban on smoking in parks and at beaches.

Although officers are clear to search a vehicle if the driver appears to be impaired, authorities are not allowed to search a car if they simply smell marijuana, burnt or otherwise. Additionally, the act of smoking behind the wheel does not warrant a car search.

Smoking or vaping the substance inside the vehicle while driving is, however, still prohibited. In order to search the trunk of a vehicle, officers are required to determine a "separate probable cause to believe the trunk contains evidence of a crime (e.g. gun recovered from under driver seat)."

The new guidance also states that officers "may not approach, stop or detain a parolee based on their use or possession of lawful amounts of marijuana," unless the terms of their parole specifically prohibit it.

When it comes to users under the legal listed age of 21, law enforcement authorities do not have actionable jurisdiction on the matter. Officers may only have "the ability to issue a civil summons."

Individuals can also not be cited for selling marijuana unless they receive actual compensation for the product. "Hand-to-hand exchange of lawful amounts ... without compensation to a person 21 or over, is not considered a sale," the memo reads.

Although nearly half of the proceeds from marijuana sales will be used to help communities that recorded overwhelming marijuana-related offenses, reports indicate that it may take up to two years before the [funding initiative](#) takes effect.

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US Ends Sanctions, Visa Restrictions Against International Criminal Court Personnel
by [Evan Craighead](#)

In September 2020, the US government sanctioned International Criminal Court (ICC) Chief Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda and ICC Jurisdiction, Complementary, and Cooperation Division head Phakiso Mochochoko. Then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also declared the US would restrict issuing visas to those aiding the ICC in investigating US personnel.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced on Friday that US President Joe Biden revoked Trump-era Executive Order 13928 on "Blocking Property of Certain Person Associated with the International Criminal Court (ICC)."

As a result, the US government lifted previously imposed economic sanctions against ICC Prosecutor Bensouda and her assistant Mochochoko, as well as "visa restrictions in connection with the Court," Blinken detailed.

The ICC officials were originally sanctioned by the State Department in September 2020, after former US President Donald [Trump declared](#) the Court's investigation into alleged US war crimes in Afghanistan posed a national security threat.

"These actions on the part of the ICC, in turn, threaten to infringe upon the sovereignty of the United States and impede the critical national security and foreign policy work of United States Government and allied officials, and thereby threaten the national security and foreign policy of the United States," Trump claimed in his June 2020 executive order.

Blinken emphasized Friday that the State Department under the Biden administration continues "to disagree strongly with the ICC's actions relating to the Afghanistan and Palestinian situations."

"We maintain our longstanding objection to the Court's efforts to assert jurisdiction over personnel of non-States Parties such as the United States and Israel," he said. "We believe, however, that our concerns about these cases would be better addressed through engagement with all stakeholders in the ICC process rather than through the imposition of sanctions."

The ICC has yet to issue a public response to the US move, but the Court did immediately condemn Washington's economic sanctions back in [September 2020](#).

"These coercive acts, directed at an international judicial institution and its civil servants, are unprecedented and constitute serious attacks against the Court, the Rome Statute system of international criminal justice, and the rule of law more generally," the ICC stated.

The ICC drew worldwide attention in early March this year after Bensouda announced that the court would investigate crimes supposedly perpetrated by the Israel Defense Forces and other armed groups across Palestine since June 13, 2014. The announcement was [met with praise](#) by the Palestinian Authority and Hamas alike, while [prompting outrage](#) in Israel, with the country's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, decrying it as "undiluted antisemitism."

In particular, the ICC announcement stated that the court's "territorial jurisdiction in the situation in Palestine [...] extends to the territories occupied by Israel since 1967, namely Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem". Bensouda also added that there is "a reasonable basis" to believe that war crimes "have been or are being committed in the West Bank" by Israel and the militant group Hamas, requesting an investigation.

The inquiry will also examine actions of Palestine's Hamas movement, which fired rockets into Israel during the 2014 Gaza war, Bensouda said.

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Video: North Carolina Cop Who Choked, Bodyslammed K-9 Resigns Ahead of Termination by [Evan Craighead](#)

Last month, a video went viral showing an October 2020 incident in which a Salisbury Police Department (SPD) officer was observed choking and hitting a K-9 during training practice. While announcing an investigation into the viral footage, the SPD argued K-9 "training tactics and corrective measures can sometimes be alarming out of context."

The SPD announced in a Friday news memo that its extensive, third-party investigation concluded that SPD Officer James Hampton engaged in "inappropriate discipline of Zuul," the K-9, and violated department policy by exhibiting behavior "inconsistent with his K-9 training." "As a result, he was recommended for termination," [the memo](#) read.

However, Hampton tendered his immediate resignation before authorities were able to fire him. "The Police Department did not incentivize or otherwise request Officer Hampton's resignation, which he tendered as a matter of right," the SPD claimed, also noting it will continue to make changes to its K-9 training operations, policies and procedures.

In the aforementioned footage obtained by FOX46 last month, Hampton is seen lifting Zuul off the ground with a leash attached to the dog's collar.

"We're good, no witnesses," someone is overheard saying as Hampton continues to dangle Zuul by his collar. Another person is heard chuckling in the background.

Soon after, the officer is seen body-slammng the K-9 against the side of his police cruiser.

"Is your camera on?" asks someone, after the officer punches Zuul and commands him to sit. Be advised, the footage below contains scenes some may find disturbing.

"Can you go flip my cameras off? Just the front camera," an officer asks.

In addition to negative backlash from the public, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) President Ingrid Newkirk also got involved in the matter, penning an op-ed in the [Salisbury Post](#) on March 24 calling for humane K-9 training - as opposed to domination-based training.

"A dog who is yelled at — let alone hit — is demoralized and starts to distrust human interactions," she wrote. "Today, we know, or should know, that dogs like humans break down mentally if they are bullied."

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Blinken Says That Israelis and Palestinians Should Enjoy Equal Measures of Freedom, Security by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier Friday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced the reversal of a Trump-era executive order that sanctioned International Criminal Court (ICC) officials and restricted the issuance of visas to Court personnel. At the same time, Blinken emphasized Washington disagrees with the ICC war crimes probes into both the US and Israel.

During a Friday phone call, Blinken and his Israeli counterpart, Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi, discussed a number of topics, including regional security challenges for the Israeli government, humanitarian assistance for Palestinians and "the normalization of relations with Arab and Muslim majority countries," [detailed](#) State Department spokesperson Ned Price.

"The Secretary emphasized the Administration's belief that Israelis and Palestinians should enjoy equal measures of freedom, security, prosperity, and democracy," Price said. "The Secretary reiterated the United States' strong commitment to Israel and its security and looks forward to strengthening all aspects of the US-Israel partnership."

Price's statement on the US-Israel government phone call made no mention of US President Joe Biden's decision to cease sanctions against ICC Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda and Phakiso Mochochoko, head of the ICC Jurisdiction, Complementary, and Cooperation Division.

Bensouda notably announced [in March](#) that the Court would probe alleged [war crimes](#) perpetrated by the Israel Defense Forces and other military groups since June 2014. The probe follows a preliminary examination, in which Bensouda's office "engaged with a wide array of stakeholders, including in regular and productive meetings with representatives of the Governments of Palestine and Israel, respectively."

Formal notices on the investigation were issued to both Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Last week, Israel moved [to suspend](#) the travel permit of Riyad al-Maliki, foreign minister of the PA, following his visit to the ICC. That same day, al-Maliki's team was interrogated by Israeli intelligence officials.

"The minister was held up for around half an hour, and his staff was delayed for around an hour, all told," PA Foreign Ministry official Ahmad al-Deek detailed, noting the foreign minister was stopped while traveling from Jordan to the West Bank.

Earlier in March, UAE-based The National outlet reported, citing an official document of the US State Department, that Washington planned to [reset relations with Palestine](#), reversing several steps taken by the previous administration that favored Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank and ignored the two-state solution principle as a basis for settling the longstanding conflict. Russia has welcomed US declarations in support of the two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but expects the Biden administration to [walk the talk](#). "Our approach to this [MidEast peace process] has been confirmed through our stance on the international arena and concrete work in international organizations. At the moment, the similarities in our and US approaches are only confirmed by [US] statements. That is why we need to wait for concrete actions," the Russian Foreign Ministry said last week.

Tensions heightened in the region after former US President Donald Trump unveiled his peace plan for the Middle East, which, among other things, stipulated Israel incorporating the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and keeping Jerusalem as its capital. The move was rejected by the Palestinian leadership, which later terminated all treaties with the United States and Israel. The two-state solution envisages creating a Palestinian state that will peacefully cooperate with the existing State of Israel, laying out the foundation for lasting peace in the Middle East.

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Major League Baseball Caved to 'Liberal Lies' by Moving All-Star Game, Says Georgia Governor
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Major League Baseball (MLB) Commissioner Rob Manfred announced Friday that the US league "fundamentally supports voting rights" and will be relocating the 2021 All-Star Game and MLB Draft from Atlanta, Georgia, following the state's passage of S.B. 202. The state law, in part, calls for added ID requirements and shorter runoff election periods.

Georgia Governor Brian Kemp took to Twitter Friday evening to express his disagreement with the MLB decision to not hold either 2021 All-Star Game or MLB Draft in Atlanta.

[Kemp argued](#) the baseball league's "decision is not about access to voting. It's about a lack of courage to stand up to the lies of a radical mob hellbent on distorting the truth for political gain." "If MLB is worried about access to the ballot box, they should check their own backyard. They may be afraid of [US President] Joe Biden and [Stacey Abrams](#), but I'm not," he added.

Many have credited the 2020 election wins of Biden, Sen. Jon Ossoff (D-GA) and Sen. Raphael Warnock (D-GA) to the voting access initiatives backed by Abrams. Abrams narrowly lost the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election to then-Georgia Secretary of State Kemp.

"Today, Major League Baseball caved to fear, political opportunism, and liberal lies," the Republican governor said in a [separate statement](#).

Kemp's rebuke comes as a direct response to the statement released by the MLB commissioner earlier Friday. The decision to relocate the MLB events was also opposed by the [Atlanta Braves](#), but [backed by](#) Democratic Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms.

"Major League Baseball fundamentally supports voting rights for all Americans and opposes restrictions to the ballot box," MLB Commissioner [Manfred said](#). "In 2020, MLB became the first professional sports league to join the non-partisan Civic Alliance to help build a future in which everyone participates in shaping the United States."

"We want to make our voice heard loud and clear in our opposition of the recent Georgia legislation that not only disproportionately disenfranchises the Black community, but also paves the way for other states to pass similarly harmful laws based largely on widespread falsehoods and disinformation," the quoted statement read.

This is not the first time a group has cited racial bias in their opposition to SB 202.

The Georgia chapter of The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) also argued in a [new lawsuit](#) that "SB 202 is the culmination of a concerted effort to suppress the participation of Black voters and other voters of color by the Republican State Senate, State House, and Governor."

Sen. Warnock, who became the first Black US Senator from Georgia after unseating former Sen. Kelly Loeffler (R-GA), [has referred](#) to the bill as "Jim Crow in new clothes," but [Kemp insists](#) SB 202 is "another step toward ensuring our elections are secure, accessible and fair."

"It further secures our absentee ballots by mail by requiring a photo I.D., which the vast majority of Georgians support. It is also adding days of early voting on the weekends. We're expanding the right to vote in Georgia," he told Fox News last week.

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Boyz N the Hood Vs. Robinhood: Ice Cube Files Lawsuit Against Troubled Trading Stock App

After the debacle over restricting GameStop stocks, trading app Robinhood found itself at the end of dozens of class-action lawsuits. Many investors have filed more than 90 lawsuits claiming that the trading app's actions were unfair and unlawful.

American rapper O'Shea Jackson Sr, popularly known as Ice Cube, recently joined in on the legal battles against Robinhood after the company used a photo of him inside an early March newsletter without permission.

The [lawsuit](#), which was filed in California federal court on Wednesday, lists four complaints against Robinhood, including the misappropriation of his likeness in one of their ads, loss of money and property due to the legal violation of these actions, among other offenses.

At the center of the lawsuit is [an image](#) of Ice Cube that the financial services company included in a March [Robinhood Snacks](#) newsletter to consumers. The photo is a still image pulled from his 2007 film "Are We Done Yet," with the caption "Correct yourself, before you wreck yourself." The caption is a reference to a lyric from his 1992 song "Check Yo Self."

The lawsuit claims that the company "used the image and likeness of Ice Cube – without his permission – to promote Robinhood's terrible products and services."

The lawsuit states that shortly after the image was posted, Ice Cube notified the company in writing that the use of his image was not authorized and demanded an immediate cease and desist. However, a Robinhood spokesperson revealed to multiple [news outlets](#) that "the image was licensed and used for non-commercial, editorial purposes in connection with a blog article."

[Reports](#) indicate that Ice Cube has said the ad is damaging his reputation, and that the company has ignored his demands to stop using his image and likeness.

Ice Cube's attorneys, Michael A. Taitelman and Sean M. Hardy slammed Robinhood in the lawsuit, blasting the app as "a wolf in sheep's clothing."

"[Robinhood is] an unscrupulous and predatory conglomerate that professes to be a financial services company for the everyday person," the lawyers continued, referring to the services offered by the company as "another get-rich-quick scheme."

Earlier, in addition to facing lawsuits, Robinhood CEO Vlad Tenev testified in February in front of the House Financial committee over allegations of market manipulation and a disregard for user well-being.

Touching on the February hearing, the lawsuit refers to the CEO as Vlad "the stock Impaler" Tenev, and mocks his "corporate crocodile tears" shed before congressional lawmakers when he was confronted over the fact that a Robinhood user [committed suicide](#) after he was wrongly told he owed over \$700,000 due to risky Robinhood trades.

"Human lives are simply collateral damage as Robinhood single-mindedly rushes toward an initial public offering, so its feckless and apathetic Millennial founders can jump ship and live out their days in luxury and hedonism," the lawsuit states.

Robinhood faces a long road ahead in repairing its image and regaining the trust of its users. In late March, the trading app announced it had filed a [draft registration](#) for the public offering of its common stock, though details have not yet been determined.

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Saudi FM: Israeli Ties Will Bring Middle East 'Tremendous Benefit' if Palestinian State Established

Last November, there were talks of a secret meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Saudi officials have strongly denied the reports, but mutual concern over Iran has gradually brought Israel and the Gulf countries closer together.

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan recently acknowledged that a normalization of Israel's status would bring "tremendous benefit" to the region, but emphasized on similar comments made previously by Saudi Arabia that it must be within a plan that would deliver a sovereign state to Palestinians.

"It would be extremely helpful economically, socially and from a security perspective," he said during a [Thursday interview](#) with CNN.

Saudi Arabia has for decades reaffirmed its policy of not establishing formal ties with Israel until the conflict has been resolved, with Prince Faisal reiterating that any deal with Israel was "very much dependent on progress with the peace process."

He further noted that the process "can only be successful if we address the issue of the Palestinians, and if we are able to deliver a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders that gives the Palestinians dignity and gives them their rights."

Prince Faisal made similar comments in early December during an [online talk](#) at Med2020, where he stated that "what we need to make happen is a peace deal that delivers a Palestinian state with dignity and with a workable sovereignty that Palestinians can accept."

Last year, former US President Donald Trump brokered the [Abraham Accords](#), which found four Arab countries - the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan - in agreement to normalize ties with Israel. Palestinian officials, however, [condemned](#) the agreement and called it "a stab in the back of the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian people."

In the recent interview, the Saudi foreign minister confirms that negotiations with Israel over Palestine have been on the table for years, highlighting the [2002 Arab Peace Initiative](#), which offered normalization with Israel in return for the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.

The 2002 initiative was repeatedly endorsed but has not been agreed upon. Reports suggest that Riyadh has been working on building relations with Israel for several years.

This also comes amid a simultaneous [announcement](#) from US Secretary of State Antony Blinken that the US is revoking sanctions imposed on prosecutors and officials associated with the International Criminal Court (ICC), which recently announced that it would be [examining](#) alleged war crimes committed by the Israeli military in Palestinian areas, including Gaza and the West Bank territories.

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'Obviously an Air Accident': Nigerian Air Force Rejects Claims Boko Haram Downed Aircraft

Earlier this week, Edward Gabkwet, who serves as the director of public relations and information for the Nigeria Air Force (NAF), revealed that the force had lost contact with an Alpha-Fighter jet that was on Friday purported to have been shot down by militants. The Nigerian Air Force has denied that one of the service's aircraft was shot down by Boko Haram* - the militant group linked to Daesh*, noting in a late [Friday release](#) that it is "employing false propaganda" and seeking to take claim for what was "obviously an air accident." The service explained in its latest statement on the incident that "it is evident that most parts of the video were deliberately doctored to give the false impression that the aircraft was shot down."

Officials note that the video clip failed to show the correlation between the shooting on the ground and the mid-air aircraft explosion, noting that it would be "almost impossible for an aircraft to have exploded mid-air" while still having a good portion of its tail intact.

The statement adds that an explosion of that nature would have scattered debris from the aircraft "across several miles." The release notes that investigators are still analyzing the contents of the footage.

In the unverified [video](#), Boko Haram militants are shown standing in the wreckage of what they claim to be the shot down fighter jet.

According to the SITE intelligence Group, the video showed what appeared to be a plane exploding in midair, followed by close-up footage of the wreckage.

The video, which has been circulated on social media, is speculated to have shown the remains of a man who was described by Boko Haram militants as the pilot of the plane. It is [purported](#) that the NAF inscription on the plane matches the registration number of the Alpha-Jet that went missing in action on Wednesday.

Gabkwet previously emphasized that it was not yet clear whether the downed aircraft developed technical issues and crashed or was shot down.

The Nigerian Air Force details on its [website](#) that search and rescue efforts are still ongoing.

The latest development came days after the Chief of Air Staff (CAS) Oladayo Amao ordered an investigation into a Beechcraft King Air B350i aircraft that [crashed](#) in Abuja, Nigeria, on Sunday, claiming seven lives. The aircraft was returning to Abuja Airport after reporting engine failure while enroute to Minna.

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RPT - Moscow Patriarchate to Visit US for Orthodox Church of America 50 Years of Autocephaly

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - Hierarchs from the Russian Orthodox Church will visit Washington, DC later this year to take part in celebrations dedicated to the 50-year anniversary of granting of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in America (OCA), cleric of the Moscow Patriarchal Parishes in the United States Abbot Nikodim (Balyasnikov) told Sputnik.

"In the first half of November, if the global pandemic permits, a joint Divine Liturgy will be served in Washington, DC by the first hierarch of OCA - Metropolitan Tikhon of all America and Canada and the high representatives of the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, who will specifically travel to the United States for the anniversary events," Abbot Nikodim said.

The actual anniversary was in 2020, however both the Russian Orthodox Church and the OCA chose to postpone all celebrations in Washington, DC and other places amid the coronavirus pandemic. The special service in Alaska to commemorate one of the most venerated saints in both Russia and the United States - St. Herman of Alaska - has also been postponed.

"We still hope that the situation will allow us to hold at least some portion of these events," Abbot Nikodim said.

Both churches plan to hold a conference at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York, Abbot Nikodim added.

The Russian Orthodox Church granted a tomos of autocephaly, or decree of independence, to the OCA in April 1970 following decades of unsuccessful attempts of reconciliation after the Bolshevik revolution in 1917.

"By God's grace, we have a very warm, constructive and brotherly relationship with the OCA," Abbot Nikodim said.

Abbot Nikodim noted that Metropolitan Tikhon and the clergy and faithful of the OCA supported the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate after the uncanonical decision of Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople to grant independence to schismatics in the Ukraine.

"We are thankful for this position, which demonstrates an open, kind and good-willed relationship between our churches in the best way," Abbot Nikodim said.

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RPT - Moscow Patriarchal Parishes in US to Celebrate New York Cathedral's 120 Anniversary in May

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - The Moscow Patriarchal Parishes in the United States will celebrate the 120-year anniversary of their main church, St. Nicholas cathedral in New York City in May by serving Divine Liturgies and organizing online events, the dean of the cathedral Abbot Nikodim (Balyasnikov) told Sputnik.

"As of customary, we will celebrate our anniversary and the day of our patron saint by serving Divine Liturgy," Abbot Nikodim said, adding that under the current conditions of the pandemic it is difficult to predict something more concrete.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic restrictions in New York, the clergy and parishioners plan to organize various online events, he said.

"Currently we are conducting such preparations. In addition, we are producing a short and informative documentary about the cathedral's history," Abbot Nikodim said.

The abbot called on people to exercise patience regarding the current restrictions as events will be possible later when the epidemiological situation will allow the physical participation of a significant amount of the faithful.

"We do not want to be tied to a specific date," Abbot Nikodim said.

The ceremony of laying the cathedral's cornerstone took place on May 22, 1901, led by then-bishop Tikhon (Bellavin), who became Patriarch in 1918 and was canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church as a saint in 1989.

The cathedral, located in Manhattan's Carnegie Hill neighborhood of the upper east side, was consecrated in November of 1902.

The Patriarchal Parishes in the United States consist of over three dozen churches in various states.

Abbot Nikodim emphasized the "very welcoming and friendly" relationship with the Russian Church Abroad (ROCORA).

"Fourteen years after the reunification in 2007, we began to feel a sense of unity as united children of the Russian Orthodox Church," he said.

While ROCORA remains autonomous from the Moscow Patriarchate, both churches exist in mutual harmony, Abbot Nikodim said.

"We cooperate well in various ways," he said. "For example, some of our students study at ROCORA theological institutions and programs, while some of their students travel to Russia to study at our seminaries and we organize joint activities, which is wonderful."

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Ex-US Diplomat Charged With Concealing Financial Ties to Chinese Nationals - Justice Dept. WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - A former US diplomat has been charged for allegedly concealing his financial dealings with Chinese nationals, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"Paul Michael Guertin, 40, of Arizona and former resident of Washington, DC, was indicted on March 29, 2021 by a federal grand jury in the District of Columbia for wire fraud and obstructing an official proceeding," the release said on Friday. "According to the indictment, Guertin intentionally concealed information on his SF-86 background investigation questionnaires and in interviews with State Department background investigators."

The release said Guertin withheld information about his gambling debts, his \$225,000 loan from two Chinese nationals, and his sexual relationship with a Chinese national who he helped adjudicate her US visa application when he was working as a consular officer in Shanghai. Guertin has worked as a diplomat in Shanghai and Islamabad in addition to working for the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, the release said.

The release said Guertin held a top secret security clearance.

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UPDATE 5 - US Capitol Police Officer Killed in Vehicle Attack

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - Two individuals died in the latest attack on the US Capitol, including the suspect and a police officer who was injured in the incident, acting US Capitol Police (USPC) Chief Yogananda Pittman said at a press briefing.

"The suspect rammed his car into two of our officers and then hit the north barricade barrier. At such time the suspect exited the vehicle with a knife in hand," Pittman said on Friday. "Our officers then engaged that suspect. He did not respond to verbal commands. The suspect did start lunging toward US Capitol Police officers at which time US Capitol Police officers fired upon the suspect. At this time the suspect has been pronounced deceased."

She added that one of the two police officers rammed by the vehicle died from his injuries. The Capitol Police later said the officer who died was 18-year veteran William Evans.

Metropolitan Police Chief Robert Contee said in the press conference that the attack does not appear to be terrorism-related, but the investigation is ongoing and investigators will continue to see if there's any links to terrorism.

Contee added that there appears to be no ongoing threat following the attack.

The suspect, a 25-year-old from Indiana named Noah Green, called himself a Nation of Islam follower on his Facebook page, NBC reported.

Police said the man was driving a blue sedan when he rammed his vehicle into the North Barricade just after 1:00 p.m. EST (5:00 p.m. GMT).

A Sputnik correspondent at the scene witnessed and took photos of National Guard troops positioned around the perimeter, some carrying riot shields and other protective equipment.

"The DC National Guard deployed a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) composed of National Guard soldiers and airmen to the Capitol complex this afternoon to support the U.S. Capitol Police.

Due to operational security, we cannot discuss further details regarding the QRF. No National Guard members were injured in the incident at the Capitol," a Pentagon spokesperson told Sputnik.

National Guard presence in Washington, DC has been dwindling in recent weeks, but enough remained to surround the Capitol's entire premises.

The White House said President Joe Biden is aware of the incident, and was not in the area at the time. He arrived at Camp David at 12:53 p.m. EST where he is spending the Easter weekend, media said citing spokesperson Jen Psaki.

Biden in a statement expressed condolences and said he ordered the White House flag to be lowered at half-mast.

"I have been receiving ongoing briefings from my Homeland Security Adviser and will be getting further updates as the investigation proceeds," Biden said in a press release on Friday.

Justice Department chief Merrick Garland said the Washington Field Office of the FBI is assisting the Metropolitan Police Department with their investigation of this "tragic attack," according to a statement posted by his spokesperson.

Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas in a statement said "there is still much to be determined," about the attack and offered the department's support to the DC mayor and Capitol police.

In separate statements, US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi called Evans a "martyr for democracy," and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said the US "will forever be indebted," to the officer killed.

US Vice President Kamala Harris in a statement described the attack as an "inexplicable act of violence." She also made reference to the January 6 Capitol Hill riots.

"We continue to be proud of the courageous men and women who defend the Capitol, especially during a challenging period when they have faced two violent and deadly attacks," Harris said early Friday evening.

Just two hours before the attack, according to CNN, the suspect posted a video on his Instagram account with a caption that said: "The US Government is the #1 enemy of Black people!"

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UPDATE 4 - US Capitol Police Officer Killed in Vehicle Attack

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - Two individuals died in the latest attack on the US Capitol, including the suspect and a police officer who was injured in the incident, acting US Capitol Police (USPC) Chief Yogananda Pittman said at a press briefing.

"The suspect rammed his car into two of our officers and then hit the north barricade barrier. At such time the suspect exited the vehicle with a knife in hand," Pittman said on Friday. "Our officers then engaged that suspect. He did not respond to verbal commands. The suspect did start lunging toward US Capitol Police officers at which time US Capitol Police officers fired upon the suspect. At this time the suspect has been pronounced deceased."

She added that one of the two police officers rammed by the vehicle died from his injuries. The Capitol Police later said the officer who died was 18-year veteran William Evans.

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Contee added that there appears to be no ongoing threat following the attack.

The suspect, a 25-year-old from Indiana named Noah Green, called himself a Nation of Islam follower on his Facebook page, NBC reported.

Police said the man was driving a blue sedan when he rammed his vehicle into the North Barricade just after 1:00 p.m. EST (5:00 p.m. GMT).

A Sputnik correspondent at the scene witnessed and took photos of National Guard troops positioned around the perimeter, some carrying riot shields and other protective equipment.

"The DC National Guard deployed a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) composed of National Guard soldiers and airmen to the Capitol complex this afternoon to support the U.S. Capitol Police.

Due to operational security, we cannot discuss further details regarding the QRF. No National Guard members were injured in the incident at the Capitol," a Pentagon spokesperson told Sputnik.

National Guard presence in Washington, DC has been dwindling in recent weeks, but enough remained to surround the Capitol's entire premises.

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Biden in a statement expressed condolences and said he ordered the White House flag to be lowered at half-mast.

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IMF Approves \$2.3Bln in Financing for Kenya - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved more than \$2.3 billion in arrangements for Kenya to support recovery during the pandemic, the board said in a statement.

"The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved 38-month arrangements under the Extended Credit Facility (ECF) and the Extended Fund Facility (EFF) for Kenya in an amount equivalent to SDR 1.655 billion (305 percent of quota or about US\$2.34 billion) to support the next phase of the authorities' COVID-19 response and address the urgent need to reduce debt vulnerabilities," the fund said on Friday.

Kenya was hit hard at the onset by the COVID-19 pandemic, the release added, but a forceful policy response has led to an economic boost in 2021 after posting a slight contraction of 0.1 percent in 2020.

Even with this recovery, however, the IMF said challenges remain to achieve durable and inclusive growth, and poverty reduction.

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UPDATE 3 - US Capitol Police Officer Killed in Vehicle Attack

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - Two individuals died in the latest attack on the US Capitol, including the suspect and a police officer who was injured in the incident, acting US Capitol Police (USPC) Chief Yogananda Pittman said at a press briefing.

"The suspect rammed his car into two of our officers and then hit the north barricade barrier. At such time the suspect exited the vehicle with a knife in hand," Pittman said on Friday. "Our officers then engaged that suspect. He did not respond to verbal commands. The suspect did start lunging toward US Capitol Police officers at which time US Capitol Police officers fired upon the suspect. At this time the suspect has been pronounced deceased."

She added that one of the two police officers rammed by the vehicle died from his injuries. The Capitol Police later said the officer who died was 18-year veteran William Evans.

Metropolitan Police Chief Robert Contee said in the press conference that the attack does not appear to be terrorism-related, but the investigation is ongoing and investigators will continue to see if there's any links to terrorism.

Contee added that there appears to be no ongoing threat following the attack.

The suspect, a 25-year-old from Indiana named Noah Green, called himself a Nation of Islam follower on his Facebook page, NBC reported.

Police said the man was driving a blue sedan when he rammed his vehicle into the North Barricade just after 1:00 p.m. EST (5:00 p.m. GMT).

A Sputnik correspondent at the scene witnessed and took photos of National Guard troops positioned around the perimeter, some carrying riot shields and other protective equipment.

"The DC National Guard deployed a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) composed of National Guard soldiers and airmen to the Capitol complex this afternoon to support the U.S. Capitol Police.

Due to operational security, we cannot discuss further details regarding the QRF. No National Guard members were injured in the incident at the Capitol," a Pentagon spokesperson told Sputnik.

National Guard presence in Washington, DC has been dwindling in recent weeks, but enough remained to surround the Capitol's entire premises.

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Biden in a statement expressed condolences and said he ordered the White House flag to be lowered at half-mast.

"I have been receiving ongoing briefings from my Homeland Security Adviser and will be getting further updates as the investigation proceeds," Biden said in a press release on Friday.

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US, Japan, South Korea Vow to Continue Cooperation to Denuclearize North Korea - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - The national security advisors from the United States, Japan and South Korea have agreed to continue trilateral cooperation to denuclearize North Korea, the three officials said in a joint statement provided by the White House.

"The national security advisors shared their concerns about North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs and reaffirmed their commitment to address and resolve these issues through concerted trilateral cooperation towards denuclearization," the statement said on Friday.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Japanese National Security Secretariat chief General Shigeru Kitamura and South Korean National Security Office Director Suh Hoon met in Washington earlier on Friday to consult on the United States' review of its North Korea policy and to discuss issues of common concern.

The three advisers agreed to cooperate to strengthen deterrence in the region, the statement said.

They also discussed matters related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the unrest in Myanmar and climate change, the statement added.

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Blinken Discusses With Israel Foreign Minister Aid to Palestinians - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed with his Israeli counterpart Gabi Ashkenazi humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians and further normalization of relations between Israel and Arab countries, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"The Secretary and the Foreign Minister discussed regional security challenges, humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people, and the normalization of relations with Arab and Muslim majority countries," Price said in a statement on Friday.

The Biden administration has allocated \$15 million to aid the Palestinians to fighting COVID-19 and considers resuming full-scale assistance effectively suspended during Donald Trump's presidency.

"The Secretary emphasized the Administration's belief that Israelis and Palestinians should enjoy equal measures of freedom, security, prosperity, and democracy," Price said.

The Biden administration is looking for ways to revive the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians and urges both sides to refrain from unilateral moves.

Blinken also reiterated the United States' strong commitment to Israel's security, Price said.

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UPDATE 2 - US Capitol Police Officer Killed in Vehicle Attack

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - Two individuals have died in the latest attack on the US Capitol, including the suspect and a police officer who was injured in the incident, acting US Capitol Police (USPC) Chief Yogananda Pittman said at a press briefing.

"The suspect rammed his car into two of our officers and then hit the north barricade barrier. At such time the suspect exited the vehicle with a knife in hand," Pittman said on Friday. "Our officers then engaged that suspect. He did not respond to verbal commands. The suspect did start lunging toward US Capitol Police officers at which time US Capitol Police officers fired upon the suspect. At this time the suspect has been pronounced deceased."

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Metropolitan Police Chief Robert Contee said in the press conference that the attack does not appear to be terrorism-related, but the investigation is ongoing and investigators will continue to see if there's any links to terrorism.

Contee added that there appears to be no ongoing threat following the attack.

An NBC reporter said the suspect is a 25-year-old from Indiana named Noah Green, who called himself a Nation of Islam follower on his Facebook page.

Police said the man was driving a blue sedan when he rammed his vehicle into the North Barricade just after 1:00 p.m. EST (5:00 p.m. GMT).

A Sputnik correspondent at the scene witnessed and took photos of National Guard troops positioned around the perimeter, some carrying riot shields and other protective equipment. The Defense Department told Sputnik the national guard has been deployed.

"The DC National Guard deployed a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) composed of National Guard soldiers and airmen to the Capitol complex this afternoon to support the U.S. Capitol Police. Due to operational security, we cannot discuss further details regarding the QRF. No National Guard members were injured in the incident at the Capitol," a Pentagon spokesperson told Sputnik.

National Guard presence in Washington, DC has been dwindling in recent weeks, but enough remained to surround the Capitol's entire premises.

The White House said President Joe Biden is aware of the incident, and was not in the area at the time. He arrived at Camp David at 12:53 p.m. EST where he is spending the Easter weekend, media said citing spokesperson Jen Psaki.

Biden in a statement expressed condolences and said he ordered the White House flag to be lowered at half-mast.

"I have been receiving ongoing briefings from my Homeland Security Advisor and will be getting further updates as the investigation proceeds," Biden said in a press release on Friday.

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Biden Says Receiving Ongoing Briefings From Homeland Security Adviser on US Capitol Attack

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said that he has been receiving ongoing briefings on the attack at the US Capitol by a lone assailant.

"I have been receiving ongoing briefings from my Homeland Security Advisor and will be getting further updates as the investigation proceeds," Biden said in a press release on Friday.

Biden said he has ordered flags to be flown at half-mast in observance of the death of Capitol Police Officer William Evans, who was killed in the attack.

Earlier on Friday, a man rammed his vehicle into two Capitol Police officers at an access point near the Capitol building.

Acting Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman said in earlier remarks that the suspect exited his vehicle and tried to attack police officers with a knife before he was shot and killed.

Evans died from injuries he sustained in the attack.

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Florida Governor Bans 'Vaccine Passports' as Requirement to Get Service - Executive Order

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed an executive order that prohibits businesses requiring a so-called "vaccine passport" or other proof of coronavirus vaccination from potential customers in order to provide entry into the establishment and service.

"Businesses in Florida are prohibited from requiring patrons or customers to provide any documentation certifying COVID-19 vaccination or post-transmission recovery to gain access to, entry upon, or service from the business," DeSantis said on Friday.

The order also prohibits any entity to issue any standardized documentation for the purpose of certifying an individual's coronavirus vaccination record.

The order treats "vaccine passports" as being capable to reduce individual freedom and harm patient privacy because vaccination records contain private health information and therefore should not be shared by any mandate.

In March, the World Health Organization advised against rolling out vaccination passports.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) -

JCPOA MEETING

* The Joint Commission of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) will convene for in-person talks at the level of political directors on April 6 in Vienna, Russia's permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, told Sputnik.

* US diplomats will meet on Tuesday with their European, Russian, and Chinese counterparts to discuss ways to return to compliance with the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said.

* Iran will not be against if participants of the JCPOA, in particular Russia, help return the United States to the deal, but there is no need for mediation between Tehran and Washington, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told Sputnik.

* EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, who chairs the Joint Commission of the JCPOA, plans to "intensify contacts" with all the participants of the deal and with the United States, the European External Action Service (EEAS) said in a statement.

INCIDENT AT US CAPITOL

* Two individuals have died in the latest attack on the US Capitol, including the suspect and a police officer who was injured in the incident, acting US Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman said on Friday.

* Pittman identified the officer as 18-year veteran William Evans.

* The attack on the US Capitol that killed one officer does not appear to be terrorism-related and there appears to be no ongoing threat, Metropolitan Police Chief Robert Contee said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- * Berlin is closely monitoring the situation on the border between Ukraine and Russia, calling for de-escalation, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said on Friday after a conversation with his Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba.
- * The appearance of the US troops in Ukraine will make Russia take additional steps at strengthening its security, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
- * Russia cannot guarantee a comprehensive ceasefire in Donbas, since it is not a party to the conflict, but it will use influence to push for implementation of the previously reached agreements, Peskov said.
- * The current situation on the contact line in Donbas is "frightening" amid many provocations made by Ukraine soldiers, Peskov said.
- * National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) of Ukraine chief Oleksiy Danilov confirmed that NSDC has decided to impose new sanctions against a number of Russian companies.

BIDEN-ZELENSKY CALL

- * US President Joe Biden expressed a desire to visit Ukraine during a phone conversation with his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelensky, on Friday, Andrii Yermak, the head of Zelenskyy's office, said.
- * Zelensky said that he assured Biden of his commitment to "transform" Ukraine during a phone conversation.
- * Biden has reassured Zelensky of the United States' "unwavering support" for Ukraine, the White House said.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

- * The Netherlands will stop using the coronavirus vaccine of UK-Swedish company AstraZeneca for people under 60, RTL Nieuws reported.
- * The Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) will invest in the creation of a robot capable of conducting 300 coronavirus tests per hour at airports, RDIF CEO Kirill Dmitriev said.
- * Serbia plans to launch the first phase of production of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine against the coronavirus in May, and full production is expected to start by the end of the year, Russian Ambassador to Belgrade Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko said.

PUTIN-LUKASHENKO TALKS

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko congratulated each other on the occasion of Russia-Belarus Unity Day, discussed cooperation against the COVID-19 pandemic and other issues during a phone conversation on Friday, the Kremlin said.
- * Lukashenko and Putin talked about the situation in Belarus and external threats from Western countries, the Belarusian news agency Belta reported.

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US Capitol Police Chief Identifies Slain Officer as 18-Year Veteran William Evans

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - The Capitol Police officer who died in the attack earlier on Friday was 18-year veteran William Evans, Police Chief Yogananda Pittman said.

"It is with profound sadness that I share the news of the passing of Officer William 'Billy' Evans this afternoon from injuries he sustained following an attack at the North Barricade by a lone assailant," Pittman said in a statement.

Evans began his service with the Capitol Police on March 7, 2003 and was a member of the Capitol Division's First Responder's Unit, Pittman said.

Earlier on Friday, a man ram his vehicle into two Capitol Police officers at an access point near the Capitol building.

Pittman said during a press conference that the suspect exited his vehicle and tried to attack police officers with a knife before he was shot and killed.

Evans died from injuries he sustained in the attack.

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US Committed to Hold Accountable Those Who Killed Journalist Daniel Pearl - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in call with the family of the late journalist Daniel Pearl reaffirmed the government remains committed to pursue those who are responsible for kidnapping and killing him, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a release on Friday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with members of the family of Daniel Pearl and their representatives today to assure them that the U.S. government remains committed to pursuing justice and accountability for those involved in Daniel's kidnapping and murder," Price said.

Pearl was a journalist for the Wall Street Journal in Mumbai. He was killed while visiting in Pakistan on an assignment in the wake of September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. Pearl was investigating Islamist militants but was abducted and killed in 2002.

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US Capitol Attack Suspect Identified as 25-Year-Old Noah Green From Indiana - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - The suspect in the latest Capitol attack that left himself and a police officer dead has been identified as 25-year-old Noah Green of the state of Indiana, NBC News reported citing four law enforcement officials familiar with the investigation on Friday.

NBC's Pete Williams said in a broadcast report that Green may have lived in Virginia and in a Facebook post said he was a follower of the Nation of Islam.

Acting US Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman said in earlier remarks that two individuals died in the Capitol attack, including the suspect and a police officer who was injured in the incident.

Washington Metropolitan Police Chief Robert Contee said during the press conference that the attack does not appear to be terrorism-related, but the investigation is ongoing and investigators will continue to see if there are any links to terrorism.

Contee added that there appears to be no ongoing threat directed at the US Capitol following the attack.

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Moscow Patriarchal Parishes in US to Celebrate New York Cathedral's 120 Anniversary in May

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - The Moscow Patriarchal Parishes in the United States will celebrate the 120-year anniversary of their main church, St. Nicholas cathedral in New York City in May by serving Divine Liturgies and organizing online events, the dean of the cathedral Abbot Nikodim (Balyasnikov) told Sputnik.

"As of customary, we will celebrate our anniversary and the day of our patron saint by serving Divine Liturgy," Abbot Nikodim said, adding that under the current conditions of the pandemic it is difficult to predict something more concrete.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic restrictions in New York, the clergy and parishioners plan to organize various online events, he said.

"Currently we are conducting such preparations. In addition, we are producing a short and informative documentary about the cathedral's history," Abbot Nikodim said.

The abbot called on people to exercise patience regarding the current restrictions as events will be possible later when the epidemiological situation will allow the physical participation of a significant amount of the faithful.

"We do not want to be tied to a specific date," Abbot Nikodim said.

The ceremony of laying the cathedral's cornerstone took place on May 22, 1901, led by then-bishop Tikhon (Bellavin), who became Patriarch in 1918 and was canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church as a saint in 1989.

The cathedral, located in Manhattan's Carnegie Hill neighborhood of the upper east side, was consecrated in November of 1902.

The Patriarchal Parishes in the United States consist of over three dozen churches in various states.

Abbot Nikodim emphasized the "very welcoming and friendly" relationship with the Russian Church Abroad (ROCORA).

"Fourteen years after the reunification in 2007, we began to feel a sense of unity as united children of the Russian Orthodox Church," he said.

While ROCORA remains autonomous from the Moscow Patriarchate, both churches exist in mutual harmony, Abbot Nikodim said.

"We cooperate well in various ways," he said. "For example, some of our students study at ROCOR theological institutions and programs, while some of their students travel to Russia to study at our seminaries and we organize joint activities, which is wonderful."

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Moscow Patriarchate to Visit US for Orthodox Church of America 50 Years of Autocephaly

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - Hierarchs from the Russian Orthodox Church will visit Washington, DC later this year to take part in celebrations dedicated to the 50-year anniversary of granting of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in America (OCA), cleric of the Moscow Patriarchal Parishes in the United States Abbot Nikodim (Balyasnikov) told Sputnik.

"In the first half of November, if the global pandemic permits, a joint Divine Liturgy will be served in Washington, DC by the first hierarch of OCA - Metropolitan Tikhon of all America and Canada and the high representatives of the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, who will specifically travel to the United States for the anniversary events," Abbot Nikodim said.

The actual anniversary was in 2020, however both the Russian Orthodox Church and the OCA chose to postpone all celebrations in Washington, DC and other places amid the coronavirus pandemic. The special service in Alaska to commemorate one of the most venerated saints in both Russia and the United States - St. Herman of Alaska - has also been postponed.

"We still hope that the situation will allow us to hold at least some portion of these events," Abbot Nikodim said.

Both churches plan to hold a conference at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York, Abbot Nikodim added.

The Russian Orthodox Church granted a tomos of autocephaly, or decree of independence, to the OCA in April 1970 following decades of unsuccessful attempts of reconciliation after the Bolshevik revolution in 1917.

"By God's grace, we have a very warm, constructive and brotherly relationship with the OCA," Abbot Nikodim said.

Abbot Nikodim noted that Metropolitan Tikhon and the clergy and faithful of the OCA supported the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate after the uncanonical decision of Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople to grant independence to schismatics in the Ukraine.

"We are thankful for this position, which demonstrates an open, kind and good-willed relationship between our churches in the best way," Abbot Nikodim said.

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Police Chief Says Officer, Suspect Dead in Attack on US Capitol

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - Two individuals have died in the attack on the US Capitol, including the suspect and a police officer who was injured in the incident, acting US Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman said on Friday.

"The suspect rammed his car into two of our officers and then hit the north barricade barrier. At such time the suspect exited the vehicle with a knife in hand," Pittman said during a press conference. "Our officers then engaged that suspect. He did not respond to verbal commands. The suspect did start lunging toward US Capitol Police officers at which time US Capitol Police officers fired upon the suspect. At this time the suspect has been pronounced deceased."

Pittman added that one of the two police officers rammed by the vehicle died from the sustained injuries.

Washington Metropolitan Police Chief Robert Contee said during the press conference that the attack does not appear to be terrorism-related, but the investigation is ongoing and investigators will continue to see if there are any links to terrorism.

Contee added that there appears to be no ongoing threat directed at the US Capitol following the attack.

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Lockdown Lifted at US Capitol After Attack, Area Around Crime Scene Restricted - Police

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - The lockdown at the US Capitol has been lifted following an attack that left both a police officer and the suspect dead, but the area around the crime scene remains restricted, US Capitol Police (USCP) said on Friday.

"The USCP has cleared the external security threat incident located at all of the US Capitol Campus buildings, however the area around the crime scene will continue to be restricted and individuals should follow police direction," Capitol Police said in a statement.

Pelosi Orders Flags at US Capitol to Be Flown at Half-Staff After Officer Died in Attack

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has ordered the flags on Capitol Hill to be flown at half-staff after a police officer died in an attack, Deputy Chief of Staff Drew Hammill said on Friday.

"Speaker Pelosi has ordered the flags at the US Capitol to be flown at half-staff due to the death of a US Capitol police officer in the line of duty today," Hammill said via Twitter.

Hammill also said the flag lowering will probably take longer due to the lockdown around the Capitol.

Earlier on Friday, an unknown person rammed his car into two police officers near the US Capitol building killing one of them. The attacker was also reported dead. Police say they are investigating whether the attacker had any terrorism-related motive.

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Attack on Capitol Police Does Not Appear to Be Terrorism-Related, Ongoing Threat - Police

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - The attack on the US Capitol that killed one officer does not appear to be terrorism-related and there appears to be no ongoing threat, Metropolitan Police Chief Robert Contee said on Friday.

"At this time it does not appear to be an ongoing threat ... it does not appear to be terrorism-related," Contee said.

But law enforcement will continue to investigate whether the suspect had any terrorism-related motive, he added.

The suspect who rammed his vehicle into two Capitol Police officers was shot and killed by an officer. One of the police officers rammed by the vehicle died from his injuries, Contee said.

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US Ends Sanctions, Visa Restrictions Against International Criminal Court Staff - Blinken

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) -The United States ended the sanctions and visa restrictions it had imposed on personnel of the International Criminal Court, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement on Friday.

"Today, President [Joe] Biden revoked Executive Order 13928 on 'Blocking Property of Certain Persons Associated with the International Criminal Court (ICC),' ending the threat and imposition of economic sanctions and visa restrictions in connection with the Court," Blinken said. "As a result, the sanctions imposed by the previous administration against ICC Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda and Phakiso Mochochoko, the Head of the Jurisdiction, Complementarity and Cooperation Division of the Office of the Prosecutor, have been lifted."

The Biden administration also terminated the policy from 2019 that imposed visa restrictions on certain ICC personnel, Blinken added.

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US Police Chief Says Officer, Suspect Dead in Attack on Capitol

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - Two individuals have died in the latest attack on the US Capitol, including the suspect and a police officer who was injured in the incident, acting US Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman said on Friday.

"The suspect rammed his car into two of our officers and then hit the north barricade barrier. At such time the suspect exited the vehicle with a knife in hand," Pittman said in a press conference. "Our officers then engaged that suspect. He did not respond to verbal commands. The suspect did start lunging toward US Capitol Police officers at which time US Capitol Police officers fired upon the suspect. At this time the suspect has been pronounced deceased." She added that one of the two police officers rammed by the vehicle died from his injuries.

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US National Guard Deploy at Capitol After Car Rams Into 2 Police Officers

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - US National Guard soldiers have deployed to the US Capitol after a knife-wielding suspect rammed a car into two police officers at a checkpoint, a Sputnik correspondent on the scene reported on Friday.

Soldiers carrying riot shields and other protective equipment deployed to guard the perimeter around the Capitol building after the incident, the correspondent reported.

The National Guard told Sputnik none of its troops were injured in the attack on the Capitol.

Some 2,200 guardsman had been deployed previously.

"The DC National Guard deployed a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) composed of National Guard soldiers and airmen to the Capitol complex this afternoon to support the U.S. Capitol Police.

Due to operational security, we cannot discuss further details regarding the QRF. No National Guard members were injured in the incident at the Capitol," a DC National Guard Spokesperson said.

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US Urges Iran to Immediately Release All 'Wrongfully Detained' US Citizens - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - Washington has called on Tehran to immediately release all US citizens wrongfully detained in Iran, US Department of State deputy spokesperson Jalina Porter said in a press briefing on Friday.

"We call on Iran to immediately and safely release all US citizens who are wrongfully detained in Iran," Porter said.

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Suspect Who Rammed Vehicle Into Checkpoint at US Capitol Has Died - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - The knife-wielding suspect who rammed a vehicle into two police officers at the US Capitol has died, local media reported on Friday. Multiple media outlets including NBC, CNN and ABC reported that the suspect died after an encounter with police. NBC reported that the suspect was shot by police.

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UPDATE 3 - Vehicle Rams 2 Officers at US Capitol, Suspect Reportedly Shot

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - US Capitol Police (USCP) said a vehicle rammed into two USCP officers at an access point at the Capitol and the suspect is in custody, while media reported that a knife-wielding suspect has been shot and killed.

"USCP is responding to the North Barricade vehicle access point along [Constitution] Avenue for reports someone rammed a vehicle into two USCP officers. A suspect is in custody. Both officers are injured. All three have been transported to the hospital," Capitol Police said in a statement.

A Sputnik correspondent at the scene witnessed and took photos of National Guard positioned around the perimeter.

The Washington Post reported that the suspect was shot and that two officers appear to be in critical condition.

Multiple media outlets said the suspect had a knife.

Earlier in the day, US Capitol Police locked down the Capitol due to an external threat. Several road closures have been put in place around the Capitol grounds due to a police investigation including at Maryland Av, NE and Constitution Av, NE west bound towards the capitol is currently closed.

The FBI is responding to the incident, the Washington Field Office said.

The Defense Department also said the national guard has been deployed.

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UPDATE 2 - US Capitol Police Respond After Vehicle Rams 2 Officers

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - US Capitol Police (USCP) said on Friday that a vehicle rammed into two USCP officers at an access point at the Capitol and the suspect is in custody.

"USCP is responding to the North Barricade vehicle access point along [Constitution] Avenue for reports someone rammed a vehicle into two USCP officers. A suspect is in custody. Both officers are injured. All three have been transported to the hospital," Capitol Police said in a statement.

The Washington Post reported that the suspect was shot and that two officers appear to be in critical condition.

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The FBI is responding to the incident, the Washington Field Office said.

The Defense Department also said the national guard has been deployed.

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Emergency Teams Transport 2 People Injured in Attack at US Capitol - DC Fire Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - Emergency teams have transported two people injured in attack at the US Capitol, Washington, DC Fire Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Friday. "We were responded to the report of the shooting at the US Capitol, and we have transported two patients from that scene. This is the only information that I can offer you at the moment," the spokesperson said.

Earlier, police responded to reports that a vehicle rammed two officers at the Capitol. Media reported that a knife-wielding suspect was shot.

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US Capitol Police Respond After Vehicle Rams 2 Officers, Knife-Wielding Suspect Shot

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - US Capitol Police (USCP) said on Friday that a vehicle rammed into two USCP officers at an access point at the Capitol and the suspect is in custody. "USCP is responding to the North Barricade vehicle access point along [Constitution] Avenue for reports someone rammed a vehicle into two USCP officers. A suspect is in custody. Both officers are injured. All three have been transported to the hospital," Capitol Police said in a statement.

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US Capitol Police Say Responding After Someone Rammed Vehicle Into 2 Officers

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - US Capitol Police (USCP) said on Friday that a vehicle rammed into two USCP officers at an access point at the Capitol and the suspect is in custody. "USCP is responding to the North Barricade vehicle access point along Independence Avenue for reports someone rammed a vehicle into two USCP officers. A suspect is in custody. Both officers are injured. All three have been transported to the hospital," Capitol Police said in a statement.

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Fully Vaccinated Americans Travel Within US Without Prior Testing - Health Agency

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has updated its COVID-19 guidance for fully vaccinated adults who can now travel within the United States without being tested though it is still not recommended they do so, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said in a briefing on Friday.

"Fully vaccinated people can resume travel at low-risk to themselves. For domestic travel, fully vaccinated people do not need to get a COVID-19 test before or after travel and do not need self quarantine after travel," Walensky said.

With respect to international travel, Walensky said fully vaccinated people do not need to get a coronavirus test before they leave the United States unless it is required by the country of destination.

At the same time, fully vaccinated travelers are supposed to present a negative test result before boarding an international flight back to the United States while not being required to quarantine upon arrival and still should be tested 3-5 days after coming back to the country. Walensky said individuals are considered fully vaccinated either 2 weeks after a person received the second dose of the coronavirus vaccine or after receiving a single-dose vaccine. Regardless of the vaccination status, everyone should wear a mask on all form of public transportation, she added.

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US Capitol on Lockdown Due to 'External Security Threat' - Congressional Staffer

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - The US Capitol is on lockdown Friday afternoon due to an outside security threat in the area, according to a congressional staffer.

"Capitol: Due to an external security threat located [at] US Capitol [All] Campus Buildings, no entry or exit is permitted at this time," Capitol police said in a statement

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US, Bahrain Discuss Diplomatic Opening With Israel, Gulf Security - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Bahraini counterpart Abdullatif bin Rashid al-Zayani spoke about first embassy to be soon opened in Israel and the prospects of security in the Persian Gulf, Department of State spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement on Friday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with the Bahraini Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Abdullatif bin Rashid al-Zayani," Price said. "Secretary Blinken and the Foreign Minister discussed Bahrain's historic opening with Israel, ways to capitalize on progress made at the first US-Bahrain Strategic Dialogue held in December, and joint regional security initiatives throughout the Gulf."

Blinken also welcomed Bahrain's successful steps in combating human trafficking, the statement said.

Earlier this week, the official Bahrain News Agency reported that King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa appointed Ambassador Khalid Yusuf Al-Jalahma to head Bahrain's first-ever diplomatic mission to Israel.

Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi welcomed Bahrain's appointment of its ambassador after the two countries normalized relations and called the move "another important step" in the implementation of the peace agreement.

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US Congratulates New Niger President on Successful Power Transition - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - The US government congratulates the new Niger President Mohamed Bazoum on the peaceful transition of power to his new administration, Department of State spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement on Friday.

"The United States congratulates Niger President Mohamed Bazoum on his inauguration, marking an historic transfer of power from one democratically elected president to the next," Price said. "This is a significant milestone for Niger's democracy. We congratulate the Nigerien people on this achievement."

The United States values its strong relationship with Niger and looks forward to working with Bazoum's administration to expand bilateral relations, including in the areas of development, humanitarian assistance, security and trade, Price said.

However, the US government is still concerned by the outbreak of violence that occurred in Niamey on March 31, Price also said.

"We condemn any attempt to undermine Niger's democratically elected government and call on all Nigeriens to work together for the good of the Nigerien people," he added.

Bazoum's victory in the February election was confirmed by the constitutional court in March amid calls for nationwide protests from the opposition. His inauguration ceremony came only a few days after a failed coup attempt and was attended by the leaders of Togo, Chad, Senegal, Mali, Gambia, Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire.

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Biden Says US Has 'Long Way to Go' Despite Huge Jobs Creation in His First 2 Months

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Friday that the US employment and economic recovery still had a long way to go despite his administration creating a record of nearly 1.4 million jobs in its first two months.

"The first two months of our administration has seen more new jobs created than in the first two months in any administration in history," Biden told a news conference. "But we still have a long way to go to get our economy back on track after the worst economic and job crisis in nearly a century."

Earlier on Friday, the Labor Department announced that the US employment expanded by 916,000 in March, adding to the 468,000 jobs created in February - the first month of the Biden administration.

Nevertheless, Biden said there were 8.4 million fewer jobs now than in March 2020, before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

Biden also said the existing deficit could be overcome faster with the 19 million new jobs forecast from his so-called American Jobs Plan, which will run off a \$2.3 trillion, eight-year infrastructure development program he proposed on Wednesday.

"Nearly 90 percent of the infrastructure jobs created under the American Jobs Plan can be filled by people who don't have a college degree and 75 percent of those good-paying jobs don't need an associate's degree," Biden said. "It's a blue-collar blueprint for increasing opportunities for people who've helped build the country and have been ignored or neglected for much too long by our government."

The US president downplayed any long-term economic harm from the jobs plan which he proposed to pay for by raising the corporate tax to 28 percent from the current 21 percent and levying more taxes on families earning \$400,000 and above.

"It's a once-in-a-generation investment in our economic future, a chance to win the future, paid for by asking big corporations, many of which do not pay any taxes at all, just to begin to pay

their fair share," Biden said. "And I won't raise a penny of tax in a family making less than \$400,000 a year."

The US economy shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, after a 2.2 percent growth in 2019, data shows. The Federal Reserve has forecast 2021 growth at 6.5 percent.

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White House Says US Watching Russia's Alleged 'Disinformation' Campaign on Situation in Ukraine
Sputnik

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US Issues 'Wanted' Notice for Russian Business Director on Espionage Charges - FBI

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - The FBI is seeking a former Russian intelligence officer and aircraft engine company director on charges of economic espionage, the agency announced in a "wanted" notice issued on Friday.

"Wanted by the FBI: Alexander Yuryevich Korchunov [for] conspiracy to commit theft of trade secrets; attempted theft of trade secrets," the notice said.

Korchunov worked as the director of a Russian state-owned company UEC while also serving as an intelligence officer with Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). The FBI said he is wanted for his alleged involvement in the theft of trade secrets from the United States.

"It is alleged that, between 2013 and 2018, Korchunov conspired and attempted to steal trade secrets from an American aviation company. Korchunov's job was to encourage Western aviation companies to work with UEC to advance Russia's aviation technology," it added.

Korchunov hired engineers employed by a subsidiary of a large US aviation company to consult on the re-design of the Russian PD-14 engine and allegedly hid UEC's procurements of Western technology through subsidiaries and partner companies. He was able to acquire the company's confidential engineering patterns, for Russia, the FBI said.

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US Takes Over 171,000 Migrants Into Custody at Southern Border in March - Preliminary Data

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - US immigration enforcement apprehended more than 171,000 migrants illegally entering the United States at the border with Mexico in March, the

Washington Post reported citing preliminary data it obtained from Customs and Border Protection (CBP) on Friday.

The report said the total number of apprehensions on the border in March marks the highest monthly total since 2006.

Sputnik reached out to CBP to confirm the data but did not receive an immediate response.

In February, 100,000 migrants were apprehended at the border - a spike of nearly 30 percent from the previous month. The Biden administration is on pace to top the previous annual record set in 2019 of over 977,000.

A majority of undocumented asylum-seeking migrants apprehended at the southern border are fleeing violence and poverty in Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and El Salvador.

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Biden Says Increasing Corporate Taxes Will Not Slow US Economy

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Friday that his proposal to raise taxes will not slow the US economy, but will make it work better.

"Raising taxes, as studies show, will not slow the economy," Biden told reporters after a press conference held on the US monthly jobs report. "All I'm asking corporate America is to pay their fair share. It will not slow the economy, it will make the economy function better, it will create more energy."

On Wednesday, Biden rolled out his administration's \$2 trillion plan to upgrade US infrastructure with funding expected to come from a proposed tax increase on large corporations. Critics have warned that Biden's plan will lead to hyperinflation, even an inflationary collapse, and cause a capital flight.

Biden's plan proposes raising the corporate income tax to from 21 percent to 28 percent, introduce a global tax of 21 percent and eliminate deductions for offshoring businesses. Biden also promised that no American earning less than \$400,000 each year will see a tax increase. The White House, citing a recent study, said 91 Fortune 500 companies paid no federal income tax in 2018.

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Biden Says US Has 'Long Way To Go' Despite Huge Jobs Creation in His First 2 Months

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Friday US employment and economic recovery still had a long way to go from the COVID-19 despite his administration creating a record of nearly 1.4 million jobs in its first two months.

"The first two months of our administration has seen more new jobs created than in the first two months in any administration in history," Biden told a news conference. "But we still have a long

way to go to get our economy back on track after the worst economic and job crisis in nearly a century.”

The president said there were 8.4 million fewer US jobs now than in March 2020, before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. He also forecast the creation of 19 million jobs if a \$2 trillion infrastructure development package he announced this week is passed.

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Biden in Phone Call With Zelensky Affirms 'Unwavering' US Support for Ukraine- White House

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has reassured his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky of the United States' "unwavering support" for Ukraine, the White House said in a statement on Friday.

"President Biden affirmed the United States' unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity," the statement said.

Biden also confirmed the United States' commitment to revitalize the strategic partnership with Ukraine, particularly regarding Zelensky's agenda to tackle corruption and implement reforms, the statement also said.

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Biden, Zelenskyy Have Phone Conversation amid Rising Tensions in Eastern Ukraine

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had their first phone conversation as counterparts on Friday discussing the alleged Russian troop movements along Ukraine's borders, Politico White House correspondent Natasha Bertrand said on Friday.

"Biden and Zelensky just finished their conversation, which lasted about 30-40 minutes, I'm told. Biden reasserted the US' commitment to Ukraine and they spoke about the reported Russian troop buildup in the east and Zelensky's anti-corruption efforts," Bertrand said in a tweet.

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US Agrees to Participate in Iran Nuclear Talks With Europe, Russia, China – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) – US diplomats will meet on Tuesday with their European, Russian, and Chinese counterparts to discuss ways to return to compliance with the 2015 Iran

nuclear deal, or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"We have agreed to participate in talks with our European, Russian and Chinese partners to verify the issues involved in a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA," Price said in a statement. "We do not anticipate presently that there will be direct talks between the United States and Iran through this process, though the United States remains open to them."

The talks are scheduled to take place in Austria on April 6, and the United States does not expect to see any immediate breakthroughs, Price said.

Participants will discuss the "nuclear steps" that both Iran and the US need to take to return to compliance with the JCPOA, including sanctions relief steps, Price said.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said earlier on Friday that the United States would not take part in a meeting of the JCPOA in Vienna.

In 2015, Iran signed the JCPOA with the P5+1 group of countries (the United States, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom - plus Germany) and the European Union.

The deal required Iran to scale back its nuclear program and severely downgrade its uranium reserves in exchange for sanctions relief, including lifting an arms embargo five years after the deal's adoption. In 2018, the US withdrew from the JCPOA and began imposing sanctions on Iran in violation of the agreement.

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US Laboratory Tests Air-Launched Cruise Missile in B-52 Upgrade Program - Air Force

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - The US military has conducted a series of ground tests on an air-launched cruise missile (ACLM) at Eglin Air Force Base as part of the B-52 strategic bomber modernization program, the US Air Force said on Friday.

"The 53rd Wing brought its test and evaluation mission here to the McKinley Climatic Lab in March to test an air-launched cruise missile," the Air Force said on its website. "The ground

testing was part of Air Force Global Strike Command's Nuclear Weapons System Evaluation Program or NucWSEP."

The wing's geographically separated unit, the 49th Test and Evaluation Squadron (TES), carries out the annual program. During the tests, the ALCM is flown on a test stand in a climate-controlled chamber with temperatures ranging from -55 degrees to +120 degrees to simulate free flight, the Air Force said.

"Throughout the four-hour test, the ALCM sends data to 49th TES technicians. Squadron members operate the test station that emulates the B-52 during the missile launch sequence and monitor missile performance. This type of testing provides engineering data to augment the assessment of weapon systems' reliability," it said.

The testing is designed to increase confidence in the air launched cruise missile system that is carried by the B-52s, the Air Force said.

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US Adds 916,000 Jobs in March, Unemployment Rate Dips to 6.0% - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - The US unemployment rate dipped slightly to 6.0 percent in March as the country added a much higher-than-forecast 916,000 jobs in a pandemic-suppressed market, the Labor Department announced on Friday.

"Total nonfarm payroll employment rose by 916,000 in March, and the unemployment rate edged down to 6.0 percent," the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a unit within the Labor Department, said in a statement.

For February, the bureau originally reported a non-farm payrolls growth of 379,000 and an unemployment rate of 6.2 percent. On Friday, it revised the February jobs growth number to 468,000 but kept the unemployment rate at 6.2 percent.

Economists polled by US media had an on-target unemployment forecast of 6.0 percent for March, although their expectations for jobs growth were way lower at 660,000.

"This report lands on Good Friday ... (and) there's nothing to dislike in this report," economist Adam Button said in a commentary on ForexLive. "The unemployment rate was in line with estimates but given the uptick in the participation rate, that's good news."

The leisure and hospitality sector was the biggest driver for employment in March with 280,000 jobs, the Labor Department said.

The government sector alone added 136,000 jobs, from "continued resumption of in-person learning and other school-related activities in many parts of the country," the department said. Education and health services saw 101,000 jobs to nearly double their February gain, while new positions in transportation and warehousing rose by almost 50,000. Retail trade jobs rose by 22,500 for a third straight monthly gain, and professional and business service jobs also posted a third consecutive monthly increase, with payrolls climbing by 66,000.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus pandemic. By latest estimates, almost 8.5 million of those jobs have not returned.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell has said he did not expect the United States to return anytime soon to maximum employment, which will be one of the central bank's criteria for raising interest rates, now at near zero. The Fed says maximum employment will be reached when the jobless rate falls to 4.0 percent or below.

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RPT: PREVIEW - US Hosts Japan, S. Korea Security Advisers as It Completes N. Korea Policy Review

WASHINGTON, April 2 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan hosts on Friday his counterparts from Japan Shigeru Kitamura and South Korea Suh Hoon as the Joe Biden administration nears the completion of its North Korea policy review.

Day-long trilateral consultations will be held at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, and are expected to cover a wide range of regional issues and foreign policy priorities, including maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and combating climate change.

"I think the most important reason for this trilateral is that it will give Jake and our team the opportunity to discuss our policy review on North Korea," a senior US administration official told reporters.

He reiterated that the review is in its final stages.

"We have done extensive consultations across the US government, in Congress, we have consulted previous individuals and teams that had been involved in diplomacy with North Korea. We are prepared now to have some final consultations with Japan and South Korea... I think it would be fair to say that each of these countries are intensively interested in our plan," the official said.

Among specific issues likely to be raised he mentioned recent North Korea's missile tests, the impact of the coronavirus outbreak on the country and its diplomacy with China.

National advisers also intend to have an extensive discussion of technological challenges with an emphasis on semiconductors supply chains.

"Our three countries hold many of the keys to the future of semiconductors manufacturing technology and we will seek to affirm the importance of keeping these sensitive supply chains secure," the official said.

The participants will voice "very serious" concerns about violence in Myanmar and China's aggressive behavior in the Indo-Pacific, discuss preparations for the global climate summit to be hosted virtually by US President Joe Biden later in April.

The meeting follows visits of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to Japan and South Korea.

It's hailed by the White House as "the first National Security Adviser-level multilateral dialogue of the Biden administration, reflecting the importance we place on broadening and deepening our cooperation on key issues and advancing our shared prosperity across a free and open Indo-Pacific."

It's planned as a private event without media availability in a closed-down area.